

Chapter 830 Excavation

Catelyn looked over the evacuation plans once more. She understood the need for Hallowfort to act as a stronghold in case of a large scale attack or in case the plans of the Architect came to fruition. A need not because of their own resources, but simply because they were underground and because the Meadow was here.

However even with the tree and the resources available to the settlement, it would be a challenge to house all the people that could possibly arrive through the teleportation gates. New ones were being added to quickly move even thousands.

So far the Accords had designated five possible shelters for lower level individuals to weather through an attack from the Ascended. Or a scenario similar in scope, like high level four marks rampaging or directly hunting for them, other realm invasions, war with an Elven Domain, or anything similar.

One of those shelters would be Hallowfort. Underground, the northern terrain on the surface to provide a difficult environment to traverse, and the Meadow as a stationary defense force capable of stopping or displacing even threats that Ilea would have difficulties facing. The goal however was that even with the Meadow focusing its entire might on single high level attackers, Hallowfort would have to protect itself, while feeding, and housing those assigned to be sheltered here. A tremendous increase in scope and far beyond any expansions their council had considered for even the coming decades.

However, they hadn't planned with the Accords in mind. Dwarven enchanters and builders, vegetation mages, earth mages, and the Meadow itself. All lending their expertise, magic, and time, to increase the expansion a hundred fold. And they had planners and administrators present that would optimize the space and resources they had available. The Meadow and Aki were overseeing most of it, the amount of data simply too much for any other individuals to handle. Instead they assigned teams to oversee various specific areas and let them loose within their limited space.

Hundreds of tunnels were being dug into the stone, supports setup, walls erected and enchanted. Entire halls were excavated and equipped with soil from the Plains, dug up by the Guardians and teleported through the Taleen network. Entire rivers were diverted from the underground lake below Hallowfort, and nature mages were assigned their work spaces. Food diversity would be limited for now but quantity would not be an issue.

Guardians were felling entire forests near Riverwatch and within Lys to supply carpenters for furniture, materials all over the Plains bought up by the Accords to provide supplies for their extensive projects. While Hallowfort itself remained the small town atop the ancient statue overlooking its massive crystal lit cavern, it already had become much more. The upper levels of the Descent, the domain of the Meadow, and extensive areas all around now dug out to provide new rooms and halls. All of it was now flowing together into one massive underground ecosystem.

Their projects were moving at a much faster pace due to the presence of the Meadow, but while the other strongholds couldn't benefit from a four mark being of space, wood, and earth, they had started with a far more advanced setup. Ravenhall was already a massive city sprawling far both above ground, but farther still below. Their defenses were formidable, new turrets inspired by those employed in the Pit had been added to the many and well enchanted walls, Viscera and finally

Eregar's Haven providing both space for people to shelter and food to be grown. The latter had been expanded so much in the past years that Ravenhall already met its food supply goal in case of an emergency.

Housing was the main issue as they were already a sought after city. Their entire infrastructure was now focused on adding defenses both above and below ground, while including housing in the Haven. The landscape had previously been claimed by the Shadow's Hand and had largely remained as a training ground for the mercenaries. Now however, it could serve a new purpose.

The Taleen were working hard to expand the underground city of Io. Now that the limitations of the One without Form were gone, they were free to dig into the earth, growing their already intricate system to provide potential shelter for thousands. The same was true for Iz, though with the Guardian's presence, it was perhaps the most defensible stronghold next to Hallowfort. Catelyn didn't know nor would she dare guess at which being could provide a safer haven. The Meadow with its incredible magic or Aki with his unending army of machines.

Iz itself had seen many new residents, though it remained largely empty. Much of its infrastructure was present, though food provisions had to be expanded upon. A task delegated to Elder Lucas of the Shadow's Hand. Him and over a hundred hired nature and earth mages from all over the Plains.

The last stronghold would be the Pit. Their defenses would have to be increased to include threats coming from above, though the dwarves were progressing fast with their work, many of their residents working in other settlements to provide lacking knowledge and enchantments. It was definitely interesting to see teams of Pit and Taleen dwarves working together with Praetorians to work out efficient designs to be mass produced in the many facilities controlled by the Guardian of Iz.

"You look pale," Elana said. The woman had remained stoic despite all the fast moving changes.

"What we had here... for centuries. This is it. It will never be the same," Catelyn whispered. The arrival of the Meadow, the teleportation gates. It had felt like they still had time.

"You'll still have your den. Just atop a sprawling underground city," Elana said, a slight smirk on her face.

"And you plan to rule it?" Catelyn asked. She had always known the woman was ambitious. Not only because she was a former queen. There was a spark in her that none other in the Hallowfort council had. A spark she sometimes saw in humans. Ilea had the same, though with goals entirely different.

"I plan to provide what I can, with the abilities that I have," Elana said, glancing at Catelyn. "You think me some all consuming monster, but I simply saw how incapable everyone around me was. That's why I became the ruler of Rhyvor. I wanted to realize our potential. The Accords are entirely different. And we're finally moving."

"You are a monster," Catelyn sighed. She looked at the dozens of tables, the machines, the beings of different species, all working together. She glanced at the map hovering above a central platform, made of light enchantments provided by the Taleen and populated by data from Aki. She could see hundreds of thin strands of light move outwards at a crawling pace where she understood Executioners, Destroyers, and Hunter Praetorians explored the lands. Expanding in every direction. On their search for resources, monsters to hunt, dungeons, and facilities of the Ascended. Many were digging straight down, equipped with void magic or enchanted drills already in mass production.

And still, it seemed small. Even just the distance between Hallowfort and Ravenhall looked astronomical. Despite the numbers, how much could they really cover? When an enemy could hide anywhere below ground.

New Executioners were being built but the materials were rare and expensive, the process complicated and time consuming. Normal Guardians, even Centurions would not last long in the wilderness, let alone deep below in the unexplored dungeons and caverns of the north.

Catelyn shifted her attention to a commotion near the black grass of the Meadow. A gate had opened. *She's back already?*

Flying up and over, she could see her friend clad in her black ash, standing between beings that looked much like herself. They came through her gate and quickly moved through the domain, curious eyes taking in the new territory, spells flowing through the Meadow's domain. Powerful spells, on par with what she had felt from the Elven hunters now living in the Descent.

The Mava.

Could it be? No. I awakened, I was not one of them. Not before, and not after. But they look so similar. She felt a connection to them, if only due to her form, and still, it was nice. To know there were others out there similar to herself. Others that were now here. Ilea had convinced the Mava to visit, to get to know the Accords. Perhaps to have them negotiate for some kind of deal, a trade of information.

The Meadow spoke to her in the next moment. *"Please welcome the Skal of the Snake, Mava of the Sava desert. They are here to support us in the search of the Ascended facilities, and in the destruction of Ker Velor. We will work to integrate both their knowledge and resources."*

"What? I thought they were difficult to convince? Even the divination mage didn't think it possible," Catelyn spoke, looking at the tree before she squinted at Ilea.

"They apparently like cake," the Meadow sent.

Catelyn felt her heart skip a beat.

"And Ilea returned a sacred artifact taken by the Architect. They have deemed him their enemy more than they have deemed us their allies, though they will forego norms and expectations if it means they can help stop him," the Meadow added.

"I don't know how she does it," Catelyn murmured to herself.

"Is it really a surprise at this point?" Elana asked before she got back to work.

"The machine is called Aki, maybe you're familiar with the Taleen creations," Ilea sent to Ohn Ika, the silver fox prowling around one of the working Hunter Praetorians.

“They were fighting elves for millennia, and recently it stopped. So these Accords are the reason for that?” he asked, sniffing the metal creation.

“We would be interested in any movements from the Elves that you have observed, due to our interventions,” the Meadow sent.

“More infighting, though what I know is not recent information. Few of us care to travel that far north and east, but the forests hold interesting beasts and foods,” Ohn Ika said before turning to look at an approaching fox. *“Now who is this peculiar being. You are not one of us, are you?”*

“Catelyn of Hallowfort. It’s nice to make your acquaintance,” she said, giving Ilea a look.

She smiled at the two and let them be. The Mava certainly had enough to explore at this point. She turned to a few Taleen machines and two enchanters, opening a gate back to the Sava desert before they could ask. *“I do hope you checked with them?”*

“Of course,” Aki said. *“They do not object. Mainly due to the availability of pastries.”*

“Fair,” Ilea sent, closing the gate behind them as soon as they had passed. She watched the Mava engage in conversation with the various beings present. Dwarves, elves, Dark Ones, a Greater Lich, machines, and a very confused former Monarch of the Sunlight Wastes.

“What could you have possibly offered them to come here?” Nelras asked as he approached her. He seemed wary of the fox creatures though he was largely ignored.

Ilea thought it interesting how easily the Mava seemed to integrate with everyone. They had something agreeable about them. Despite the powerful magic many of them wielded, she felt nobody was concerned. Except for the monarch.

“An old enemy?” she asked, her arms crossed as she turned her attention to the expanding light magic hologram map. Markers were present for settlements, dungeons, monster populations, and gate locations, both existing and planned. The culmination of all their efforts. The results of a single day. *We might actually be able to deal with this.*

“A pest,” the former elf spoke. Though perhaps he remained an elf, simply trapped within a dwarven war machine.

“Arrogant as ever. A few of them could hold their own against some of the stronger elves I’ve met. Perhaps they could’ve fought even you, if they worked together,” Ilea said.

The machine just made a disgruntled noise. He did however not deny her assumption.

Ilea assumed the Mava were bothered quite a lot by the Domains. Far more worthy opponents than the westernmost cities of humanity. Though young elves would be absolutely taken apart by the foxes. Perhaps they were.

“I have not seen them move in such force,” Nelras said.

“You’re not the only thing I found in that vault,” Ilea said. *“What do you think?”*

“They’re whimsical. Chaotic.”

“Like elves?” Ilea said.

He didn’t speak.

“If you’re annoyed that they’re involved and your Domain isn’t, I can bring you to the Sunlight wastes,” she suggested.

He hissed. “No. I’ve told you before that my kind would reject me. Nor would they seek to support a task such as this. Searching for cursed places below ground. Those are not our ways. We hunt moving prey, in the light of the suns.”

“Can’t do that anymore if the suns are gone,” Ilea said. “Well I suppose you could hunt in the light of the moons.” She didn’t mind the occasional moonlit battle in Kohr. The atmosphere was rather pleasant.

“It does not matter. I am not their Monarch anymore, nor would I go against the rules of the Oracles, even if I were.”

“And the Oracles couldn’t be convinced to change their rules?” Ilea asked.

“By you? You would burn away in their presence,” he spoke and laughed.

“I doubt it,” Ilea said. She meant it.

Nelras hissed. “You are powerful, which makes you arrogant. You have not seen what I have seen.”

“I fought Ker Velor and survived. You fought Ker Velor and were reduced to a soul marble,” Ilea said and raised her brows.

“I’m not comparing you to myself,” he said and considered. “I will tell you, when you’re ready.”

“Ready for what?” she asked.

“To visit my Domain,” he spoke.

Ilea smiled. “Not quite as monarchy anymore, are we? You’re aware that I’m human, right?”

“Our realm is at stake,” Nelras spoke, looking at his hands. “I am free once more, but stuck inside of this dwarven abomination. And still, I would seek the Oracles. If I believed there to be even a remote chance of success. You are human, yes, but I am not blind to what is gathered here. I am not blind to what you are.”

“We can meet them whenever,” Ilea said. She wouldn’t say no to seeing what a Light Domain Oracle looked like. The resistance training would be through the roof!

Nelras hissed and left her. “I will tell you when you’re ready.”

“A productive talk,” the Meadow sent. *“He seems agitated. The addition of the Mava has already proven useful.”*

“Whatever he means by being ready. I’ve already met an Oracle,” Ilea said.

“You survived the encounter,” the Meadow sent.

“You think he expects me to beat one in a fight?” she asked.

“Perhaps.”

“I better get to hunting then, any interesting finds yet?” she asked.

“Many dungeons, some four marks, though none that could seriously challenge you. I would suggest Sephilon if I had a way back, that or your Kohr.”

“No anchors left behind?” Ilea asked.

“None. The form in which you brought me here... it was a last resort. Hope perhaps, to find a better home,” the Meadow sent.

“And you did,” Ilea sent, taking a stroll past the many set up workstations, tables, magic projectors, and teams. The domain started to remind her more of an open plan office than anything else, though with enchantments to keep the noise limited to the various teams working together. She could see new tunnels that had been added, reaching deep into the stone with dozens if not hundreds of entries on either wall, each holding a room, another tunnel, or entire halls. She didn't know. *“Impressive work.”*

“We are well under way, resources will be reallocated once Hallowfort is prepared. My might was underestimated,” the being sent, looking at its figurative nails.

“Yes, you are quite amazing. Though still limited,” Ilea said.

“You've grown too powerful. The monsters you face are not the norm. I'm surprised you don't have a godslayer title yet,” the Meadow said.

“There is one like that?” Ilea asked. It sounded cool. She wanted it.

“I don't know. Though there are beings considered divine, and killing them would surely be a monumental task. One perhaps worthy of such a reward.”

“Does that mean I have to fight and kill you?” Ilea asked.

“You're not quite a challenge yet, little human,” the Meadow spoke.

“Just you wait,” Ilea said with a smile. *“I wanted to check out the Haven with a few people, are they ready?”*

“We've discussed the Haven. More will come with you. We need to learn as much about it in as little time as possible. They will go this afternoon, you should join,” the Meadow sent.

“If you've already discussed it, why am I needed?” Ilea asked, stretching her arms. She had kind of hoped to go right now, letting her put off what she had to do.

“You are needed because an Ascended will be in the proximity of a Source that we do not know anything about. We may be able to trust her intentions with the Architect, but not with this resource. You and Aki will be there. As a deterrent,” the Meadow spoke.

“Sounds annoying,” Ilea said. Though she wouldn't put it past Scipio and Nes to get some stupid ideas. A Source was the reason the Olym Arcena broke apart, and the reason for a near realm wide conflict in Elos. They couldn't take this lightly. And they had to secure this one as fast as possible. At least as securely as the one within the Taleen sphere. A good thing then, that the dwarves were part of their Accords.

If they don't plan on building another One without Form. This will be an interesting excursion.